

Benicia Arsenal Commanding Officer's Quarters  
(Quarters No. 1, Building No. 28)  
Benicia Industrial Park  
Benicia  
Solano County  
California

HABS No. CA-1843

HABS,  
CAL.  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BENICIA ARSENAL COMMANDING OFFICER'S QUARTERS HABS No. CA-1843  
(Quarters No. 1, Building No. 28)

Location: 1 Commandant Way, Benicia Industrial Park,  
Benicia, Solano County, California.

Present Owner: Benicia Industries, Inc., c/o Al Wanger, Vice-  
President, Benicia Industrial Park, Benicia,  
California 94510

Present Occupant/Use: Restaurant operated by Fred Kerstad.

Significance: Fittingly one of the most gracious and elegant  
buildings on the arsenal grounds, the Commanding  
Officer's Quarters were built in 1860.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1860, per datestone.
2. Architect: None known.
3. Original plans and construction: The first known plans for the Commanding Officer's Quarters are undated drawings in the National Archives entitled "Designs for Officer's Quarters at Benicia Arsenal, Cal." (HABS No. CA-1843-9). These drawings show a two-story, hipped-roof, T-shaped structure with a modillioned cornice. A one-story porch with Doric columns extends along the entire length of the east side. The front block was an essentially square, four-room center-hall house, with service functions located in the rear wing. The plan shows that the main entrance was on the east side and the stairway was located north of the entrance hall.

Another drawing in the National Archives, entitled "Commanding Officer Qrs." and dated March 19, 1859, shows a more severe Greek Revival-style structure. While the shape and layout of the building were essentially the same, here the main entrance was located on the south side, with the stairway to the east. This was apparently the drawing that was used for construction.

4. Alterations and additions: In 1876, plans that resemble the 1859 ones were published in a book, but shortly thereafter the building was altered considerably on both the exterior and the interior. These alterations, perhaps an attempt to bring the building more in line with the Italianate style of the recently completed Duplex Officers' Quarters (HABS No. CA-1947), were indicated in pencil on the 1859 drawings. The original entrance

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on the south side of the Commanding Officer's Quarters was replaced by a one-story polygonal bay window similar to the windows used at the Duplex Officer's Quarters. The former side door on the east became the new main entrance. This required moving the stairway from the east side of the hallway to the former entrance way on the south. At the same time, apparently, a new porch with Corinthian columns was constructed, replacing the original Doric-columned porch. A polygonal bay window was also added on the second floor above the new main entrance. Both the porch across the front and the bay window on the south side were surmounted by balustrades; these were removed after 1915. A parapet above the cornice was also removed after 1915, revealing a shallow hip roof.

- B. Historical Context: Julian McAllister was the commanding officer of the arsenal between 1860 and 1886, with the exception of two years between 1864 and 1866 when he was called east to help with the defense of New York City in the Civil War. The son of a prominent Savannah, Georgia, family, he was the brother of New York society leader Ward McAllister, and Hall McAllister, a prominent San Francisco lawyer. McAllister was much involved with the social life of Benicia and was instrumental in the planning and construction of St. Paul's Episcopal Church. The Commanding Officer's Quarters were the first building at the arsenal constructed during his command.

From 1905 to 1911 the arsenal had as its commander Colonel James Walker Benet, father of the well-known writers Stephen Vincent, William Rose, and Laura Benet, all of whom lived in the Commanding Officer's Quarters.

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: The following drawings for this building are located in the National Archives, Cartographic Division, Record Group 156:

"Designs for Officer's Quarters at Benicia Arsenal, Cal." Black ink with purple, yellow, and blue watercolor on paper. Two plans and an elevation labeled "C. O. Quarters," and two plans and an elevation labeled "Lieut's Quarters." Folder 3. (HABS No. CA-1843-9)

"Commanding Officer Qrs." Notation in pen: "Ordnance Office, March 19, 1859." Plan and two elevations. These show the building as it was constructed with alterations made after 1876 indicated in pencil. Folder 3.

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Unlabeled drawing. "First floor, bldg. #28" in pencil. Black ink on linen. Plan with labels "Main House" and "Ell Part" and specifications of some of the dimensions. Folder 3.

Unlabeled drawing. "Second floor, Bldg. #28" in pencil. Black ink on linen. Plan with labels "Main House" and "Ell Part" and specifications of some of the dimensions. Folder 2.

Seven unlabeled sheets. Black ink with blue and yellow watercolor on paper. Sheets 1-4 are in folder 3, sheets 5-7 in folder 2.

Sheet 1. Details of principal windows

Sheet 2. Details of finish for interior doors

Sheet 3. Details of doors and windows

Sheet 4. Details of front entrance doors

Sheet 5. Piazza sections and details with elevation of front entrance door.

Sheet 6. Details of rear piazza

Sheet 7. Section of capitals for columns

Unlabeled sheet. Black ink on paper. Four window elevations. Folder 4.

Unlabeled drawings. Ink on linen. Plans with a prominent label stamped on one of the sheets: "Vellum tracing cloth." Folder 3.

Another set of drawings for the building, apparently showing it as constructed, is published in a volume entitled Plans of Officers' Quarters at the Arsenals and Armory, compiled by the Army Ordnance Office in 1876 and published by the Government Printing Office.. Plate 8 shows the ground floor and first floor plan of the building. These are very similar to the plans in the National Archives.

B. Old views:

Photograph, apparently of the commanding officer's house, 1868. On the back is the notation: "Cmdr. Craner's Personal Carriage, 1753-39." Reproduced from an original in the possession of the Mare Island Naval Base in Vallejo, which supplied the identification and the date. Collection Fred Kerstad, operator of a restaurant currently in the building.

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Photograph of the house, apparently from the top of the Clocktower Building, ca. 1905. Reproduced in Laura Benet, When William Rose Stephen Vincent and I Were Young (New York, 1976), p. 88.

Two photographs of the building from the east. U.S. Army Photograph, ca. 1915 and ca. 1956. Location of originals unknown; photocopied for HABS in the 1950s. (HABS No. CA-1843-7 and -8)

Five or six photographs of the interior, ca. 1950s. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Norman Peltier, Benicia.

Prepared by Robert Brueggmann  
Project Historian  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with Exxon Company, U.S.A. (a division of Exxon Corporation) and the Benicia Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of H.A.B.S., the project was completed during the summer of 1976 at the Historic American Buildings Survey Field Office, Benicia, California, by John P. White (Assistant Professor, Texas Tech University), Project Supervisor; Robert Brueggmann (University of Pennsylvania), Project Historian; Kenneth Payson (Cornell University), Architect; and student assistant architects Scott Barnard (University of Pennsylvania); James L. Cook (Texas Tech University); and Gary A. Statkus (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign). The written data were edited by Alison K. Hoagland in the HABS Washington office in January, 1981.